

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 9, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

As you know, recent media reports revealed numerous instances of reprehensible treatment of the remains of our nation's fallen service members at Dover Air Force Base (AFB), Delaware. We have been appalled by these reports, which indicate a major failure of the Department of the Air Force (USAF) to take steps to restore an environment of accountability and trust in the manner in which our service members' remains are treated, as well as apparent attempts by the service to withhold important facts from family members who deserve a complete disclosure of the truth.

The findings of the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, as released on November 8, 2011, raise very troubling questions about whether USAF personnel responsible for mortuary operations at Dover AFB had been held properly accountable. In fact, Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner questioned, "whether the Air Force has taken appropriate disciplinary action" against key officials for their leadership failures, noting that key officials – Messrs. Keel, Dean, and Edmondson – remained employed with the service even after reports of mishandling and mistreatment of remains had been uncovered.


In addition, the refusal of the USAF to contact family members as soon as possible about problems identified by the Special Counsel created the impression that the service was seeking to cover up problems at Dover AFB. This impression was furthered by a recent *Washington Post* report that revealed that, "the Air Force dumped the incinerated partial remains of at least 274 American troops in a Virginia landfill, far more than the military had acknowledged, before halting the secretive practice three years ago, records show." Such reports raise concerns that the USAF is continuing to withhold information about problems at Dover AFB, and that the Department of Defense and the Air Force are unwilling to accept full responsibility for the mistreatment of remains that have occurred at the installation.

Although we understand that an independent panel, led by retired-General John Abizaid, is reviewing the policies and practices of the mortuary at Dover AFB, we believe this to be a matter of urgent importance that should be addressed *by you* without delay. Accordingly, we call upon you – as the civilian leader of the Department of Defense – to take immediate steps to improve oversight and control of mortuary operations at Dover AFB. In addition, we urge you to immediately hold accountable those leadership personnel responsible for activities that occurred at Dover AFB, as well as the USAF's response to the mistreatment of remains.

We trust you share our view that the men and women of our Armed Forces who have made the ultimate sacrifice, along with their loved ones, should be treated with the dignity and respect they have earned with devotion to our country and its ideals. Therefore, we urge you to immediately take steps to ensure that the family members of our fallen service members are treated with compassion and honesty, and that all are immediately provided access to any information they request about the treatment of the remains of their loved ones.

We appreciate your immediate attention to our request and look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



OLYMPIA SNOWE
United States Senator



MARK BEGICH
United States Senator